



Surviving the Winters: Housing Washington's Army during the American Revolution by Steven Elliott.

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When the Continental Army headed into winter quarters in December 1779, Gen. George Washington ordered the construction of a massive log-house city at Jockey Hollow near Morristown, New Jersey. Jockey Hollow soon surpassed ten thousand residents, making it one of the largest cities in the United States. The relevance of such encampments to the American Revolutionary War has been largely overlooked by historians. Fortunately, Steven Elliott (Rutgers Univ., Newark) has filled this gap with the very readable *Surviving the Winters*.¹

Elliott focuses on the intervals when the Continental Army was in winter camps, a process known as castrametation. He observes that castrametation was a central concern of commanders like Washington, weighing as heavily on their minds as discipline, strategy, and tactics. *Surviving the Winters* is primarily a military history, but will appeal as well to a general audience.

Elliott proceeds chronologically, each of his chapters concentrating on a winter that Washington's army (also known as the Grand Army or the Main Army) spent in camps. This is a wise choice, because it allows him to contextualize Valley Forge. It also demonstrates how Washington and his advisers experimented with various types of quarters and learned to modify European theories to fit American realities. Specifically, he argues that over time, Washington embraced log-house cities like Jockey Hollow as best suited to preserve the health and discipline of the Continental Army.

The author begins by explaining why castrametation was so important in the eighteenth century. With the rise of standing armies and the Military Revolution (alternatively called the military enlightenment here), generals needed permanent places to house and supply troops between battles. Prussian and English military planners had written extensively on castrametation and many of their works reached the American colonies. The Seven Years' War also provided lessons for men like Washington.

When the American Revolutionary War began, efforts to house troops were slapdash at best. In fall 1775, Washington sought to house and supply nearly twelve thousand Continental troops in Massachusetts. Following the European model, he ordered the construction of barracks in Cambridge and Roxbury, but this proved a failure. The Army's insufficient building materials delayed construction and led to a shortage of shelter and poor hygiene: "The environment had shown itself to be a more dangerous foe than the Redcoats" (29). By spring 1776, the Main Army had fallen to half its strength.

Following its loss of New York City in summer 1776, Washington's army was scattered across rural New Jersey. As winter approached, Washington again employed a European approach to quartering, choosing to billet troops in public and private houses. But billeting hurt discipline by forcing the army to disperse troops among civilians. The Continentals also suffered from small-

1. Orig., diss. Temple Univ. (2019).

pox, which required Washington to set up hospitals for inoculations. In spring 1777, a tent city built near Middlebrook, New Jersey, allayed some of the ill effects of billeting and disease. For the first time, the Army pursued effective sanitation measures and acquired enough food to maintain the health of soldiers.

The crucible of winter quarters was Valley Forge in the winter of 1777–78. Although Valley Forge is remembered as the worst of times, Elliott sees it as a turning point for Washington’s army. Specifically, Washington ordered the construction of log huts in an orderly fashion. “The winter encampment represented a departure from European methods and the beginning of military shelter practices suited to waging war in North America” (77). Sanitation measures also improved as did inoculations which Washington moved from recruiting stations to winter quarters.

Valley Forge became a template for castrametation. For the rest of the war, the Grand Army’s winter quarters were log-hut cities in locations with secure supply lines. But the choice of sites for such camps was hotly debated among the generals. One of the great strengths of *Surviving the Winters* is its discussion of debates between Washington and other officers over the merits of various camp sites.

The lessons of Valley Forge were first applied at Middlebrook in the winter of 1778–79. Sanitation measures improved as soldiers dug ditches to drain away their refuse. In fact, the army was so healthy and well rested that British General Sir Henry Clinton was deterred from a likely assault. The winter of 1779–80 proved more challenging as harsh weather, bad luck, and a British assault imperiled Washington’s troops encamped across New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Moreover, “The griefs of snow, cold, and fire all paled in comparison to the provisioning crisis that began in December and climaxed in the first week of January” (137). Nevertheless, the Main Army maintained better health and order due to lessons learned in previous winters.

Castrametation evolved as the Revolution reached its climax at Yorktown. Washington grew more decisive, once again stationing his army across the middle Atlantic so that it “occupied an arc of cantonments in defensible terrain outside New York” (152). Health remained far better than during previous winters as the soldiers grew accustomed to building huts and implementing inoculation efforts to limit smallpox outbreaks. Castrametation concerns waned after October 1781, although thousands remained quartered for another two years.

Surviving the Winters is a solid, well written history of quartering in the American Revolutionary War. His concentration on the war as a whole in a lucid chronological narrative allows Elliott to explore an important incremental change. It also highlights the distinctive American approach to war that emerged in the Revolution: “The American log-hut city represents one of the most important and original contributions made to the art of war” (176).

Unfortunately, Elliott’s approach relies heavily on traditional sources like letters and diaries, which results in a narrow focus on the opinions of military personnel. A broader approach might have considered the views of civilians both in Congress and in camps such as the women and children. Elliott might also have theorized more about the geographical implications of castrametation or pondered the cultural contradiction of massive military cities in an emerging nation struggling to be free from British occupation. A longer conclusion would have given him space to flesh out his argument about the significance of log-hut cities in American military history.

Despite these shortcomings, *Surviving the Winters* is an important contribution to the scholarship of the American Revolutionary War. Readers familiar with the work of Matthew H. Spring, Holly A. Mayer, and Caroline Cox² will want to add this book to their libraries.

2. Respectively, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775–1783* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2008); *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 1996); *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004).